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Lewis Minkin's Labours

The developing party-trade union relationship

Abstract

In this article I examine critically the themes raised by Lewis Minkin in his 2014 volume about Labour politics, *The Blair Supremacy* within the context of his earlier work concerning the party's relationship with its affiliated trade unions. I outline his argument concerning the development of party management, especially that regarding 'a Blair coup'. I discuss the role of norms in political explanation, the importance of formal rules in understanding Labour politics, the significance of wider changes to the party's character, how best to conceptualise the nature of Tony Blair's leadership, and finally the historical development of the party's trajectory. I conclude with an overall assessment of Minkin's corpus.

Key words: Labour party, trade unions, Blair, norms

Introduction

Lewis Minkin's mammoth, scrupulously researched, 800 page book, *The Blair Supremacy* builds on and develops the arguments mapped out in his earlier work, especially of course the two volumes, *The Labour Party Conference* (first published in 1978, see Minkin, 1980) and *The Contentious Alliance* (1991). Those familiar with the earlier tomes will be

unsurprised by the remarkable depth of the material marshalled by Minkin in the new publication alongside the sensitivity of his observations and his capacity for nuanced, qualified discussion of Labour politics. It is a scholarly tour-de-force which will become, unquestionably, a standard work on its subject. At the same time, however, I think *The Blair Supremacy* (as does Minkin's work more generally) raises a number of issues concerning Labour politics that merit further exploration. These include the emphasis placed on norms in political explanation, the role of formal rules in understanding Labour, the significance of wider changes to the party's character over the last two decades, how best to conceptualise the nature of Tony Blair's leadership, and, finally, the historical development of the party's trajectory. I consider each of these in turn. In doing so, I offer my points as part of an ongoing critical debate and not because I reject Minkin's analysis wholesale. Far from it, while I offer some qualifications, it is clear that Minkin's empirical research and analysis of Labour politics has made a fundamental contribution to scholarly examination of reformist politics in the United Kingdom (Wickham-Jones, 1996, 29-32, 199-203). Here, I extract a number of themes from over 2,000 published pages: inevitably some of my points are condensed. First, I begin with a brief overview of Minkin's corpus before offering a summary of the book's main arguments and proceeding to a critical discussion.

Minkin's corpus of work

In *The Labour Party Conference*, Minkin made a decisive intervention in debates concerning the distribution of power within Labour during the post war era. He challenged Robert McKenzie's long established claim (originally 1955; see McKenzie, 1963) that authority and control lay directly and unyieldingly with the elite of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) as

well as the view, less commonly mapped out by academics, that trade union leaders were able to command the party's activities (Finer, 1980, 93-94, might be taken as a scholarly version of such a position – see Wickham-Jones, 1996, 26-32, for a general discussion). By contrast, Minkin offered a much more cautious and qualified account of what he took to be the complex distribution of power within Labour, indicating that it was dispersed throughout many of the party's institutions including both the PLP and the trade unions. In this regard, the considerable loyalty offered by trade unions to the party was qualified in nature and conditional on a number of factors. Above all, party leaders needed to respect the traditions of the labour movement and, particularly, the existing territory of union interests and responsibilities. In effect, there was a compact between the party and the unions over its programme and over its structure. Some areas of activity and some policy decisions were off limits altogether regarding any political intervention by the PLP, in others there might be room for discussion while elsewhere organised labour would pretty much cede decision making to the party altogether. The boundaries between these areas were ill-defined and might be renegotiated or reshaped at certain points (Minkin, 1980, 11-12). In particular, Minkin took issue with the metaphor developed by Robert McKenzie that trade union leaders acted as a 'Praetorian guard' unquestioningly protecting Labour politicians from any unwarranted pressures (McKenzie, 1963, 597-9; see Harrison, 1960, 195-197). (Though he accepted that a particular configuration of union support might temporarily give the appearance of such a guard as was the case in the early 1950s – Minkin, 1980, 121, 24-5, and 323; see also Minkin, 1974, 13.)

In effect, the distribution of authority, Minkin suggested, was contingent. Unions could exert a qualified but clear influence on Labour's activities. The party's leaders in parliament could expect considerable support but, in exchange, they explicitly needed to respect union aspirations as well as the autonomy of particular areas. Such backing 'was always conditional' (Minkin, 1974, 15). Differing contexts also made a difference. In government, the Cabinet might assert itself but such actions were likely to generate a more forceful and independent role from trade unions upon a return to opposition (Minkin, 1980, 13-14, 17-18, 317-319). Under certain conditions, leading trade unionists might be more emphatic in their interventions. However, in no circumstances did they resemble the actors portrayed in the baronial power thesis, a caricature reflected in press discussion, in which trade unions simply told Labour what to do.

Just over a decade later, Minkin followed his first book up with another which examined the development of Labour's relationship with the trade unions (see Ludlam, 2003, Shaw, 2003, and Wickham-Jones, 1992). This volume was more explicitly theoretical than the first. In exploring union interventions within Labour politics, he placed substantial weight on norm-based explanation. He argued that the Labour-union relationship was underpinned by a pattern of mutual restraint (Minkin, 1991, 26-27). Other values and customs shaped the relationship, largely through unwritten rules and codes, including freedom, democracy, unity, and solidarity alongside a sense of priority. But considerable emphasis was given to the notion of self-control as the variable, above all, that explained the decisions and interventions made by actors throughout Labour politics. At the same time as developing this explicit theoretical framework, the volume exhibited the scrupulous attention to detail

and the same fine grained research which had characterised Minkin's earlier work. In the early 1990s, Minkin again distanced himself from the notion of a Praetorian guard, rejecting the suggestion that one had existed during the 1970s (Minkin, 1991, 183 and 395). But, without adopting the sweeping claims made by Robert McKenzie, he appeared to have aligned aspects of his argument closer to those deployed previously by that scholar (the PLP leadership could anticipate strong support from constrained unions).

With hindsight, I think that there is a significant shift in Minkin's outlook between *The Labour Party Conference* and *The Contentious Alliance*. In the former (and in articles written in the 1970s), Minkin had mapped out a model of Labour politics as a compact in which power was conditionally distributed. The terms of this compact meant that trade unions enjoyed significant spheres of influence and the capacity to make decisive interventions – especially if the relationship became strained (as it had done in the late 1960s). Under such conditions, 'new patterns of behaviour' emerged (Minkin, 1978, 181). Union leaders became, potentially at any rate, assertive actors, capable of developing their own trajectory and forcing 'major retreats by the parliamentary leaders' (Minkin, 1974, 33). Restraint, which Minkin highlighted so forcefully by 1991, did not play a significant part in this account. He did not flag it as one of the unwritten rules governing the party-union link (Minkin, 1978, 462), though he noted the importance of 'loyalty, community and continuity' (Minkin, 1978, 482). *The Contentious Alliance*, by contrast, put much more emphasis on an overt and overriding norm of restraint. Habits, customs and traditions steered trade unions' actions as

they fulfilled a function of ballast within the party's politics. Minkin concluded trade union leaders to be restricted and curbed by this notion of self-control.

The shift in union behaviour, of course, reflected the developing structure of the British economy in the 1980s: trade union membership fell during a period of acute deindustrialisation and political domination by successive Conservative governments (Mayhew and Wickham-Jones, 2014, 145-147). In a sense, it was natural in such adverse circumstances for trade unionists to become more constrained in their activities, within and without the Labour party. But such a context raises the possibility that the political economy of the period, rather than evolving norms, might be the most relevant explanatory factor regarding the distribution of power within Labour (see McIlroy, 1998, 546-7).

The Blair Supremacy

Minkin's volume *The Blair Supremacy* examines Labour party management under Tony Blair's leadership between 1994 and 2007, albeit with a long historical introduction and a detailed epilogue bringing events up to date. He takes issue with what he regards as a particular perception of New Labour, one articulated largely by those around Tony Blair (the most obvious example presumably would be Gould, 2011). In it, the project is presented as having saved the party from almost certain electoral extinction by modernising its structures and practices, by shifting it away from an unpopular trajectory established by intolerant left-

wingers, and by loosening the party's ties to its affiliated trade unions. By contrast, Minkin's argument is that what defined New Labour more than anything was its internal interventions in the party's politics: it was a process that was anything but democratic in the accepted use of the term. Painstakingly and remorselessly, Minkin argues that following his election as leader in July 1994, Blair instigated a coup (Minkin's term – see for example 118, 146, 464, 664) in order to entrench his control of the party. Promoted by a vanguard group of New Labour loyalists, this coup was intentional and on-going (Minkin, 2014, 118, 663-4). It involved the abrogation of existing democratic procedures and the sidelining of the unwritten rules and protocols – the norms in effect that had previously governed relations within the party (Minkin, 2014, 158-60). Stating such mantras as 'what matters, is what works', Blair's supporters instigated a series of manipulations in order to ensure they attained their desired goals (Minkin, 2014, 137-8). Such interventions were backed up with powerful emotional appeals and were carefully orchestrated, of course, with media spinning.

Minkin lays special emphasis on the role of the party officials, many of whom (though not all) ceased to be neutral civil servants (see, amongst other passages, Minkin, 2014, 155-6, 239-241, 256-258). Instead, they engaged in a range of partisan activities on behalf of the leadership. Adopting the language and metaphor of Robert McKenzie, he indicates that they came to play the role of the 'Praetorian guard' (Minkin, 2014, 521, 683, 687). In the past, as noted above, Minkin suggested this role had been wrongly ascribed to the trade unions. Here, he shifts still closer to McKenzie's position: he explicitly acknowledges that in the late 1980s and early 1990s right-wing trade unionists (and others on the NEC) 'acted as

Praetorian guard for Kinnock and saw the unions still as an essential stabilising element' (Minkin, 2014, 88). Later he endorses view that support for the leader in such a manner had in the past been the task of certain union leaders (Minkin, 2014, 521). Overall, Minkin concludes that the party's relationship with the trade unions was nothing like as problematic as the New Labour interpretation asserted to be the case. Still guided by the unwritten rules and protocols that he had identified in *The Contentious Alliance*, trade union leaders remained essentially loyal and supportive, (Minkin, 2014, 3, 13-14, 243, 272-3, 317, 669-70). In particular, he insists, with few exceptions, they have not exploited their position as major financial contributors to the party to bargain for a better deal (Minkin, 2014, 95, 259-261, 689-90; see also Minkin, 1991, 626-627). As frustrations mounted, however, especially after 2001, they became less accommodating.

The results of the coup included the sidelining of Labour's once powerful National Executive Committee (NEC), a massive reduction in the authority of the party conference, and repeated attempts to control pretty much all levels of the party from its Members of Parliament to its grassroots activists (see, for example, Minkin, 2014, 229-237, 333-362, and 239-243). Minkin offers a number of fascinating cases, many of which seem to have gone pretty much unnoticed by other scholars and commentators, detailing how policy positions were pushed through, often despite considerable opposition within the party. Perhaps most dramatically of all, he charts how the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003 was handled: for months the issue was not properly debated internally within the party before a bland motion was tabled at conference and considerable pressure applied concerning the need for unity. Then an NEC statement was abruptly withdrawn rather than face defeat. Still, there

was no formal debate within the party. Finally, in February 2003, just a month before hostilities, and against leadership opposition, the NEC considered the issue, adopting an ambiguous formula to endorse government policy (Minkin, 2014, 541-550).

Ultimately, Minkin concludes that such mechanisms were self-defeating: they fundamentally damaged trust and generated a backlash. Elements within the PLP remained determinedly resilient against such interventions. Despite sustained efforts including the resurrection of a discredited electoral college in which union votes were cast in blocks, the leadership was unable in 2000 to prevent veteran leftwing Ken Livingstone standing and winning as an independent in the election to become London's mayor (Minkin, 2014, 387-394). Members joined the party but then promptly left (Pemberton and Wickham-Jones, 2013). Participation rates in internal elections, for the most part, fell precipitously. Ultimately Blair found himself an isolated leader, one pretty much driven from office in 2007. The very features that defined New Labour fatally undermined it.

There is much in this account that is extremely persuasive. The idea that the politics of New Labour included a manipulative dimension is, of course, well-established (the classic statement for the later period is McBride, 2014). But, based on unparalleled access (certainly until around 2005) to many of the participants alongside his direct involvement in some of the party's committees, Minkin offers a comprehensive and meticulous account of the internal workings of Labour's institutional structures. The focus on party management, moreover, is a welcome break from the accounts that have focused so heavily on the

personal tension between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Indeed, he notes that, in agreement, they 'saw eye to eye on party management' (Minkin, 2014, 679).

How important are norms in shaping Labour politics?

Minkin makes much of the unwritten rules and protocols that have governed relations throughout the Labour party. Whilst he accepts that the party leadership under Tony Blair had little time for such norms, he suggests that unions continued to be directed in their actions by such notions as loyalty, ballast and, above all, a sense of restraint, especially in votes at the party conference (Minkin, 2014, 675). Thus over Iraq, the actions of anti-war unions was characterised by 'their restraint in the use of their potential power' (Minkin, 2014, 686). Certainly norms have been an important feature of Labour politics but whether they have played the kind of comprehensive, determining role that Minkin identifies is another matter. Rather frustratingly, he does not define the protocols with any precision, making it hard to assess their impact on party politics. His emphasis on 'restraint' offers a generalised conception as to what is shaping political debate within Labour, one that is consistent with a myriad of potential outcomes. It is hard to judge exactly what impact norms and customs may have had. Minkin suggests that the 'rules' governing the party (his quotation marks and I think he is including restraint here) have been open to interpretation, loose, uncertain and flexible (Minkin, 1991, 26-27, 42-43)

Indeed, Minkin's work has often relied on such generalised variables. In a passage in *The Labour Party Conference*, he argues for the importance of 'a good conference' in guiding

trade union interventions and managing arrangements (Minkin, 1980, 72-76). But without a definition of exactly what is a good conference, the concept – while illuminating a process by which arrangements were discussed within the party – says little about the exact goals for which relevant actors strived. Moreover, Minkin qualifies the importance of the good conference criterion by indicating that it might be displaced by other objectives and unforeseen outturns. In *The Blair Supremacy* he again notes the importance of a ‘good conference’ in shaping union strategies following meetings with Blair (Minkin 2014, 669 and 338). In much the same manner, in identifying the different spheres of policy influence between the unions and the party back in the 1960s and 1970s, Minkin suggests that at certain times the unions had most say over such matters as industrial relations law and economic issues (such as incomes policy). He went on to suggest that they also had an important contribution to make concerning superannuation, nationalisation, wage bargaining, nuclear disarmament and (at that particular time) Vietnam (Minkin, 1980, 53-54, 120). The issues left unaffected by such a list would almost certainly be those concluded by all actors, political and industrial alike, as being much less salient and far less important. All of which offers the potential conclusion that such boundaries were extremely fluid and unions took an interest in whatever it was that interested them. Clearly much has changed in Labour politics since the 1970s, the period in which Minkin first assessed the party-union relationship. It is unthinkable that the trade union leaders he identified at this time as being such independent and forceful actors would have reacted with the kind of restraint that appears to have characterised the industrial part of the movement more recently (and upon which he puts so much emphasis). The stability of the restraint Minkin has emphasised over the last couple of decades sits somewhat uneasily with the new patterns of behaviour he had identified in the late 1970s.

In *The Contentious Alliance* and *The Blair Supremacy*, the suggestion that actors will be guided by a norm of restraint offers little precision as to what outcomes may pertain. In the early 1990s, working very much from a Minkin-style perspective, Tony Manwaring, a Labour official, attempted to map out explicitly the protocols that might be held to define the party's relations with the trade unions. What was the protocol? 'A sense of common values, shared identity, and mutual respect' alongside separate traditions and organisational structures (Manwaring, 1992, 1). Stating that unions and party would work together, his document did little to point to the specifics of what form the relationship might take: respect – like restraint - was an elusive and sweeping concept. It is a feature of some norm based explanations that they are pitched at a very general level and do not, accordingly, offer as much explanatory power as has been claimed for them.

I am not suggesting that norms are unimportant. However, it is by no means clear to me that customs, traditions and habits have played a primary role in Labour politics over the last two decades or so. The kind of interventions made by those around the party's leadership and identified by Minkin as so central to the New Labour project, appear to rest on a mixture of intentional and often manipulative decisions alongside more emotional appeals. It is a moot point whether New Labour succeeded because of loyal support from trade unionists or whether the party leadership simply used a plethora of techniques including impassioned pleas (apologies, practical justifications) alongside other manoeuvres (meetings cancelled, decisions bounced, institutions terminated, the list is a long one) to exploit the support of their affiliated members. What is striking is that many of the

interventions detailed by Minkin seem to resonate directly with the kind of techniques identified by Robert McKenzie back in the 1950s (who in turn, of course, drew heavily on the ideas of Roberto Michels). Frequently, they look like rational and calculated actions and not ones based on some sort of conception of appropriate behaviour, the kind of feature that might define a norm. Whilst they were especially common to those around Blair, both the party leadership and senior trade unionists appear to have undertaken such deliberate decisions (see the account offered by Quinn, 2010).

Norms may underpin some trade unionists' behaviours. Most obviously, a historically grounded convention as to what is most appropriate in strategic terms may help to explain why some senior union figures remain so exclusively wedded for the most part to a political road (and to such close relations with Labour) as the means by which to achieve their goals. They remain unwilling, for the most part, to consider any other possible avenues (social partnership models most obviously, but also business unionism). In similar vein, Steve Ludlam and Andrew Taylor have noted the reluctance of trade unionists to realign the potential means by which labour might be represented (2003, 747). I am less persuaded of the importance of restraint during the years of the Blair leadership. A marked reluctance on the part of trade unionists to challenge New Labour's trajectory reflected the realities of their bargaining power and weak institutional position within the party. Unions did become more assertive after 2001. They were less tolerant and less trusting of the Labour government, developments mapped out (as ever thoroughly) by Minkin. But how far was this trajectory directly related to a norm? If it was, why did the norm appear to shift in the early 2000s? From a bargaining perspective, the Warwick agreement, agreed between

unions and the Labour party at the National Policy Forum in July 2004, marked a straightforward attempt to negotiate a better agreement in difficult circumstances (see Leopold, 2006, 196). Equally, I do not think the failure of some unions to act over Iraq marked a norm of self-disciplines as much as a straightforward calculation about the chances of success that any intervention might have.

The Blair Supremacy offers a robust defence of the trade union role in Labour party politics. As with his previous work, Minkin rightly criticises the manner in which union “barons” have been frequently caricatured. Perhaps at times, however, he makes the case too strongly. To be sure, trade unionists have been careful about overtly raising financial issues in order to avoid the perception that they might be making inappropriate demands of Labour. At the same time, however, the complex intersection of finance and policy issues remains: power can be exercised by subtle, covert and unspoken means (see, amongst others, Ewing, 2002, 24-25). Other scholars, including those sympathetic to the alliance between Labour and the unions, have offered a more assertive, potentially a more aggressive and antagonistic characterisation of financial relations between the two bodies (see Leopold, 2006; Ludlam and Taylor, 2003). From a rational choice perspective, Quinn appears, rather surprisingly, to accept that a norm had shaped party-union discussions over finance but suggests that it had ‘disintegrated’ under Blair (Quinn, 2010, 359). A ‘taboo’ was broken (Quinn, 376).

Interestingly, many senior figures within the labour movement have remained hostile to the possibility of state funding for political parties (a position that is consistent with an attempt to retain some influence via the party’s purse strings) (see, for example, Maguire, 2003, 10). Moreover, if unions have been disinclined to make open demands of Labour politicians in

exchange for financial support, such a reluctance may simply reflect the reality of their weak standing vis-a-vis the leadership and an acknowledgement of the press outcry such an overt attempt to apply pressure would engender. In June 1992, when Tom Sawyer did explicitly (and atypically) flag the possibility of 'no say, no pay' approach the newspaper response was swift and brutal: 'they [the unions] must not be thought to be running the party' (Symonds, 1992, 29). Sawyer's phrase was, unsurprisingly, deployed by Labour's critics (see, for example, White and Brown, 1993, 3).

There is some slippage at times in Minkin's reliance on norms: he concludes at a number of points that the reason for the persistence of Labour's close institutional relationship with the unions is that it is in the benefit of each to continue with it. So legislation on employment relations gave organised labour 'more gains than they had feared at the beginning of the experience', while the Warwick agreement 'gained more than union pessimists had anticipated' (Minkin, 2014, 458 and 756). Arguably then, it is not norm based but a rational arrangement, negotiated between the two sides (for a discussion of such an approach see Quinn, 2010). McIlroy notes that union leaders supported the Blair leadership 'because they preferred their chances with New Labour's variant of neoliberalism than with the Conservative version', albeit with 'some illusions' (McIlroy, 2010, 174). In a similar manner, in his contributions to the trade union links review group in 1992, Minkin stressed the mutual advantages of the relationship, arguing that the 'costs of the relationship are far outweighed by the benefits, whilst the damage of a contested divorce would be enormous' (quoted by Wintour, 1992, 4). He developed this theme in *The Contentious Alliance* at the end of which he charted the factors that tied Labour and the unions to each other (1992,

647-55). But some of the considerations he offered focused not so much on norms as on the advantages and payoffs that each side gained from an enduring relationship: among others reasons, unions got immediate access to a (for the most part) loyal party to represent their interests in policy terms. In this section of his account, the alliance does not seem to be purely norm based (see Ludlam and Taylor, 2003 for a discussion) but to reflect rational calculations as well.

More generally, it is not manifest just how important were the unwritten rules, particular that of restraint, in earlier periods. For example, Minkin's account of Gaitskell's defiance of the conference vote in favour of unilateralism in 1960 and of the union response to it focuses on the unwinding of traditions, rhetoric and accepted representative practises, alongside democratic expressions of policy differences (see 1980, 278-289). He suggests that a major reason why trade union leaders were prepared to concede greater autonomy to the Labour leadership over policy was, quasi-rationally, because they had direct access to government through the TUC (Minkin, 1980, 283). To be sure loyalty helped motivate senior union figures but it seems to have been a response to an emotional appeal as much as a generalised norm of restraint (in Minkin's words 'the emotive character of the issue itself', 1980, 283). Minkin notes some constraints on union-government relations in the 1960s but these reflected a desire to be discrete and prevent damaging disputes becoming public (Minkin, 1980, 300). For the most part, union leaders were assertive and forthright in their response to political failures: any constraints impacted on the party leaders. The restraint that Minkin notes regarding trade union leaders here is the extent to which they were compelled to follow the democratic mandate of their members (Minkin, 1980, 206-7 and

323-4). In a 1978 paper summarising his approach, Minkin emphasised the significance of fear as 'arguably the greatest force cementing the union-party connection': fear, that is, of what a Conservative government might do. But, as a motivating force, such fear is not really a norm guiding appropriate behaviours (such as the idea of restraint) but more of a rational consideration given developing political and economic circumstances. Summarising the situation, Minkin concludes 'though union leaders were often sympathetic and prepared discretely to play a party rather than a union role, on a number of issues there was simply no room for manoeuvre and on some of those considered fundamental to trade unionism there was no will for it' (Minkin, 1980, 318). In contrast to his two other volumes, restraint was largely absent from *The Labour Party Conference*.

Informal norms or formal rules?

At certain points in his analysis, Minkin puts considerable weight on relatively minor parts of Labour's political development since 1994. He notes that in 1997, just after Labour's landslide general election victory, party officials did not send out nomination forms to select the party's leader (Minkin, 2014, 232). Under clause 3C5.2 (b) of the Labour party's lengthy and complicated rulebook, nominations for the party leadership should have been requested from members of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) each year before the annual conference. These nominations (affiliated organisations and constituency parties could also make them though these had no formal role in the process) had an almost ritualistic quality. No incumbent had ever been voted out, though there had been the odd, unsuccessful challenge (the last one was in 1988). However, for a few years after 1997, there was no opportunity to renominate Tony Blair as leader. Perhaps more significantly,

there was no chance to propose an alternative as leader and so force an election. In a similar manner, Minkin notes that, in an attempt to win over support from private sector employers, Blair produced an explicitly titled business manifesto for the 1997 general election (Labour party, 1997): it was, in Minkin's words, 'another extension of the management coup' (Minkin, 2014, 287). It offered a pro-business narrative of selected policies, one of which was not even in the main manifesto.

In discussing the development of Labour's conference, Minkin details the overt lobbying of delegates by party officials, the stage management of speeches, the declining numbers of (presumably disillusioned) constituency delegates, and the poor attendance during conference debates (Minkin, 344-357, 618). He goes on to observe that in 2002 and 2003, the party did not vote at its annual conference on a proposed increase in trade union affiliation fees (Minkin, 2014, 535-6, 569). (According to the party rule book, clause III.4, such a vote was necessary at each gathering.) He describes this abrogation of the rules as being 'most serious of all' (Minkin, 2014, 683). It is hard to see other scholars evaluating the conference putting quite so much emphasis on the failure to endorse an increase in affiliation fees.

In each of the three examples given above, however, the actions of the Labour leadership did not necessarily violate a norm of party behaviour but rather they infringed a clause from the party's complex rule book. Such a pattern indicates that Minkin's concern is with the formality of Labour's constitution and the minutia of its rule book as much as with some generalised norms.

Wider changes to the Labour party

The focus on formal rules raises a wider question about the orientation of this analysis. Does Minkin's focus on the letter of Labour's constitution miss more important and wider developments taking place within the party? The failure to nominate the leader in the late 1990s might be indicative of the sweeping powers already then enjoyed by Tony Blair as the incumbent. The publication of a business manifesto without due legitimate authority is emblematic of a more fundamental, earlier shift in Labour's economic policy. Since the early 1990s Labour had actively sought the support and backing of business for its economic programme (see Wickham-Jones, 1995). This process began with the party's endorsement of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1990 and the so-called 'prawn cocktail' offensive by which senior politicians tried to win over figures in the City of London. It was intensified after Blair became leader with a number of key speeches by which he and Gordon Brown, as shadow chancellor, signalled Labour's modest intentions in office (most notably Blair's Mais lecture in May 1995). From this perspective the publication of a business manifesto, coming on the heels of a 1996 document, *New opportunities for business*, did not mark the kind of departure Minkin indicates (Labour party, 1996). It was, if anything, the culmination of a process established by past leaders, Neil Kinnock and John Smith (Wickham-Jones, 1997).

In the same manner, does Minkin's emphasis on the formal proceedings on the floor of the party conference (and especially on the formality of its rules) overlook a more fundamental matter concerning its utter reorientation? Losing just about any remaining function as a

policy-making body, the party conference became effectively a (rather supine) rally? There is, for example, little analysis in *The Blair Supremacy* of the development (and management) of fringe events - the talks, discussions, rallies, and so on - at the conference during the last twenty years. Yet the fringe has become the effective epicentre of the conference. Its meetings dominate the conference programme and its timetable (breakfast, lunch, afternoon and evening – pretty much all hours). These sessions are far less orientated to political discussion than to functional issues (promoting a product or a service, often commercially). Alongside fringe events, is the exhibition, much of which is also commercial in orientation, and the presence of a plethora of lobbyists. In many ways, the Labour conference now resembles a trade association meeting. In such circumstances, the failure to vote formally on the increase in the union affiliation fee does not seem especially important (on the development of Labour's conference generally see Faucher-King, 2005).

A Blair coup?

Whether the notion of a 'coup' fully captures Tony Blair's management of the Labour party, as Minkin proposes, is uncertain. The claim of a coup potentially misjudges the strong degree of support within the party for the New Labour project (and risks underestimating the utterly parlous state of Labour politics during the 1980s and 1990s). Certain aspects of Blair's leadership do not look as intentional and as coherent as the term coup might indicate. Some of the measures identified by Minkin happened well before Blair's leadership began in July 1994. For example, in the early 1980s, the PLP had restructured its standing orders so that when the party was in government there would be a liaison

committee to mediate (and hopefully improve) relations between backbench MPs and ministers. This body was termed the Parliamentary Committee, a title hitherto taken, depending on the party's status, by either the Cabinet or the Shadow Cabinet. The move followed a debate instigated, among others, by the MP Mike Thomas, later to defect to the Social Democratic Party, in order to try and head off much more radical proposals from Tony Benn and Eric Heffer (Thomas et al, 1979: Benn and Heffer, 1979). It seemed a straightforward measure, sensible enough, but it had an unforeseen consequence.

Under Clause V.2 of Labour's constitution, the party's general election manifesto was then drawn up jointly by its National Executive Committee (NEC) and the PLP's Parliamentary Committee. In the past the latter had meant either the Shadow Cabinet (as was the case in 1997) or the Cabinet (for example, the last time Labour was in government back in 1979). But the new standing orders meant that the Cabinet no longer filled the role of the Parliamentary Committee. So, Minkin notes, in 2001 Labour's general election manifesto was agreed by the NEC alongside a collection of ministers and leading backbenchers (Minkin, 2014, 479-80). Quite extraordinarily, Gordon Brown, the architect of Labour's economic programme was excluded as a formal member of this meeting (though a means was found to include him in it). Perhaps even more remarkably, no journalist appears to have noticed the shift: I can find no newspaper article discussing substance of the 2001 Clause V meeting. Unsurprisingly, Brown was not thrilled about his exclusion. A rule change was subsequently agreed and Clause V (3) now includes both the Parliamentary Committee and the Cabinet when Labour is in government. But clearly this shift cannot have been part of a Blair coup planned back in the early 1980s, although the outturn may have suited his

purposes. Equally, it is questionable just how significant was the composition of the Clause V meeting in 2001. By all accounts, the manifesto was fully drafted in accordance with Blair's desires well before the formal ratification took place. And, in any case, how important was the manifesto? Once again, Minkin's focus is not so much on the norms governing Labour as on the rules.

A last point concerns the extent to which Blair's management of Labour marked a departure from existing practice. There is, I think, more continuity between Tony Blair and his two predecessors as party leader, Neil Kinnock and John Smith than Minkin's appraisal at times indicates. All three leaderships were characterised by strategic interventions in the party's activities at particular points. Indeed, Minkin's evidence suggests gradual shifts in party management. For example, Andy McSmith details interventions in parliamentary selections during Neil Kinnock's leadership (McSmith, 1996, 39, 48). In 1991, Paul Davies, a defeated candidate complained acrimoniously about the manner in which the Birkenhead selection was run by the party (Wintour, 1991). During John Smith's tenure, Minkin notes the intrusive role played by partisan party officials at the 1993 Brighton conference in drumming up support from constituency delegates for the resolution introducing one member, one vote (omov) for parliamentary selections (Minkin, 2014, 100). At least one newspaper account predates such involvement to the summer of 1993 (Bevins and McSmith, 1993, 6). The resolution backing omov combined it with support for all women shortlists in an unusual and contrived fashion, a format that favoured the leadership. It meant some opponents of omov came, most reluctantly, to support it because of their prior commitment to gender equality. After their experiences under Blair's leadership, trade

union figures subsequently intervened in the 2010 leadership election in a manner that echoed New Labour's attempt to manage the selection of the London mayor during 1999-2000: access to membership lists was restricted while ballots were distributed in a non-neutral manner (Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2011). Indeed, there is much that links the last two decades with Labour's past more generally. Political management of the party was not unknown in earlier periods under Hugh Gaitskell, Harold Wilson and James Callaghan – even under Michael Foot's brief tenure as leader (and almost certainly is equally common today in other political parties). The sense of an abrupt break in management style following Blair's accession to the leadership is not clear. Developments appear much more evolutionary than Minkin's evocation of a coup suggests.

Conclusions

Rich in detail, challenging in its analysis, and carefully structured, *The Blair Supremacy* is an extraordinary achievement. Given the prevailing constraints on research and the difficulties in obtaining access, alongside a general decline in archival and published sources, it is quite possible that this kind of volume will not be published in the future. Through his fastidious research over many decades, Minkin has put together a body of work that is (and will remain) an essential source for any scholar working on the post war history of the Labour party. But some of his central conclusions appear to be based on a particular interpretation, one that rests heavily on a normative reading of the role of trade unions, and are open to challenge. At times, Minkin may make the mistake of analysing Labour politics through the lens of what he would like it to be rather than what it actually is. His argument seems shaped by a strong attachment to an idealised view of what the role of trade unions might be in a

model institutional configuration (one that he was closely aligned to as a participant at certain points, most notably in the work of the Labour Party Trade Union links review group during 1992-1993). Looking back across Labour politics over the last five decades or so are many moments at which the organised part of the movement did not appear to be restrained in its outlook. Take for example, Harold Wilson telling Hugh Scanlon to 'get your tanks off my lawn' during the battle surrounding industrial relations legislation and the government's attempt to legislate over the White Paper, *In Place of Strife*. Or, the position adopted by certain trade union leaders during the early months of the Winter of Discontent in 1978-79. Alongside the myriad of strengths in *The Blair Supremacy*, I have sought here to map out some issues for discussion: I have asked whether norms play a role of such significance in Labour politics, whether Minkin's focus is on narrow aspects of the party's constitution as much as upon its conventions, whether his analysis hides some significant wider developments to Labour politics, and whether his framework of a coup adequately captures the nature of the Blair project.

What does questioning the emphasis placed by Minkin on norms mean for our overall understanding of Labour politics? Constrictions on space permit no more than the briefest of observations here. Thomas Quinn has offered an alternative account based around the premises of rational choice theory. But I am not sure the choice of analytical frameworks is a simple one between Minkin's norms and Quinn's exchange-based account. The latter's model concerning the Warwick agreement seems hyper-rational and overly-calculating with an emphasis on 'formal enforcement mechanisms for monitoring its implementation' (Quinn, 2010, 358). I am suggesting a broader conceptual framework in which actors'

choices will reflect strategic considerations and payoffs, ones that may well be shaped by existing conventions and arrangements. Such a framework is likely to be shaped by political economic considerations (for the contours of such an approach see Daniels and McIlroy, 2010; especially McIlroy, 2010). Such an approach does not mean norms are irrelevant but rather that they should be located within a more general bargaining framework, one along the lines mapped out (albeit in a very different context) by Samuel Popkin: he suggests that norms are likely to 'malleable, renegotiated, and shifting in accord with power and strategic interaction among individuals' (Popkin, 22). At the same time, the notion of carefully considered appraisals suggest that actors will enter any discussions and negotiations having reached some sort of judgement about their bargaining position and what might be the possible realistic goals available to them. Quite what outcomes pertain from such interactions will remain shaped by many factors including the prevailing circumstances, the political context, and the resources at each side's disposal. Labour's alliance with the trade unions has been an enduring feature of the party's history: At the same time, however, there has been considerable variation over its exact form, a pattern that is likely to endure.

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